Visible results: Building the business case for ROI-driven visual marketing

CREATIVE REVIEW
MarketingWeek
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Contents

Executive summary

The importance of visual assets in making marketing effective is well understood by marketers and creatives – at least on an impressionistic level. As engagement with marketing content increasingly occurs on social platforms and mobile devices, images and videos are of paramount importance in winning – and keeping – consumers' attention, then turning this into conversions, sales and ongoing loyalty.

According to our research, nearly all marketers and creatives (94%) see the importance of visual marketing assets as significant or paramount, with nearly two thirds using the latter description. And it's therefore natural that more than half were looking to spend more in this area in the coming year at least until coronavirus hit.

Yet they are struggling badly to prove the commercial impact of visuals and justify this increased expense. Efforts to construct a business case demonstrating return on investment have not borne fruit, and a link between performance of visual assets and financial success is seen as a distant prospect.

In this report Marketing Week, Creative Review and Shutterstock have joined forces to investigate marketers' and creatives' attitudes towards visual marketing assets such as images and videos, their role in effective marketing, and the efforts being made to demonstrate the return on investment they deliver. In doing so we have discovered that, in the absence of a convincing link to financial metrics, marketers and creatives fall back on engagement as their key measure of success.

Fewer than two-fifths track either long- or short-term return on investment of visual assets, or even any brand-related metrics.

While engagement is easy to track and likely to give some indication of the commercial benefits of high-quality visual assets, the majority of marketers and creatives find it very challenging or impossible to show there is a clear relationship with either short-term sales or long-term brand health. Most believe they are behind their peers in proving there is one.

It's clear they need to do so, however. Business decision-makers are unlikely to be sold on the paramount importance of visual assets without more robust metrics that demonstrate attributable financial gains.

You can't assume engagement is a valid proxy for return on investment, and it may in fact be a distraction from more important metrics. The channels where engagement is most forthcoming and most measurable (particularly, social media) aren't those shown to deliver most effectiveness. Ebiquity's seminal 'Re-evaluating Media' study in 2018 ranked social media seventh on a list of 10 media channels for overall effectiveness – though it found marketers believe it ranks much higher.

Marketers and creatives need to get to work on building a more convincing business case for their visual marketing content, drafting in the help of more data-driven colleagues. Existing methods for measuring visual asset performance – for example pre-campaign testing, analytics and post-campaign research – are important pieces of the puzzle, but colleagues and external partners will need to help them link up all this data.

The importance of making the business case is clear, as signs are that consumption of marketing is increasingly visually led. Showing the return on their increased investment in images and videos will help marketers and creatives to gain both credibility for their disciplines, and progression in their individual careers.

Methodology

Marketing Week and Creative Review surveyed 384 marketers and creative professionals in February and March 2020.

This was accompanied by qualitative interviews between January and March with the following individuals:

Susanne Killian, *Sales and marketing spokesperson*, Audi

John Bernard, *EMEA marketing director*, Dexcom

Olivier Schaack, *Creative director,* Canal Plus

Michael Lee, *Creative director,* Oatly

James Cullen, *Art director,* Ace & Tate

Carolan Davidge, *Executive director of marketing,* British Heart Foundation

Emma Isaac, *Brand marketing director,* NatWest Group









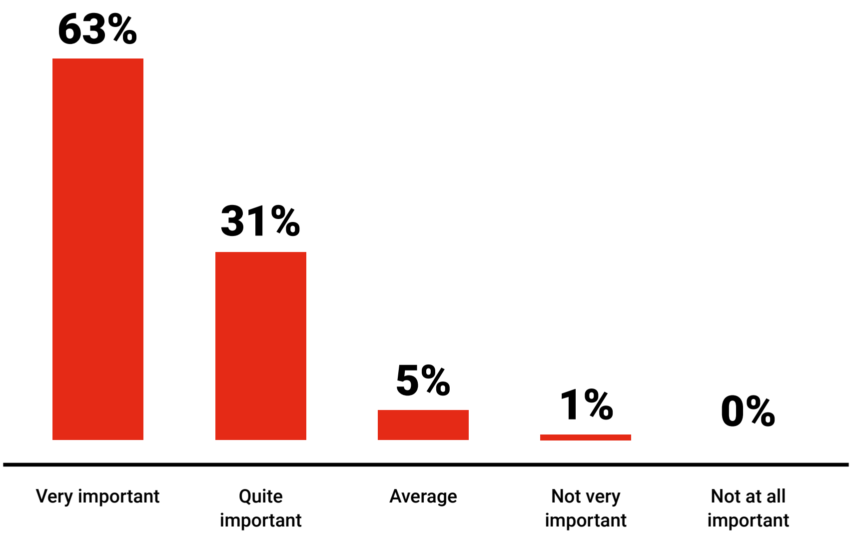
PART 1

The supremacy of visuals

Marketers and creatives are fully aware of the impact of visuals, and their growing role in making marketing effective in the contexts of how people consume media today. The vast majority of those we surveyed (94%) say visuals are of significant or paramount importance to the effectiveness of their marketing – with almost two thirds (63%) using the stronger of the two words to describe them (see fig. 1).

"Visual content – from emotive pictures of people living with heart and circulatory diseases to insightful infographics that explain the impact of our work – is vital in inspiring people to take actions to support us," says Carolan Davidge, executive director of marketing and engagement at the British Heart Foundation. "We use visual content to further the objectives of all areas of the charity."

Fig 1 — How important are high-quality visual assets to marketing effectiveness?



Increasing investment

Without doubt, these attitudes are translating into action where marketing activity is concerned. Surveyed before coronavirus, the majority of marketers and creatives (51%) expected to spend more on images and videos this year than last, with a quarter (25%) increasing their budget by more than 10%. Conversely, only 12% said they were going to spend less (see fig. 2).

As Audi's sales and marketing spokesperson Susanne Killian says: "Visually-led marketing is core for our communication. We use it in almost all media types and for almost all content types. No matter if it is digital or analogue."

But while visuals are fundamental to most forms of marketing communication, the media consumption contexts of the survey findings are clear. Use of social media platforms and mobile devices is on the rise, necessitating an ever greater volume and quality of image-led marketing content. Without this, brands' messages won't stand out among a firehose of information that is consumed and discarded in an instant.

Mobile and social drive content consumption

Two thirds of the world's population are mobile phone users, with numbers up 2.4% year on year, according to Hootsuite and We Are Social's 'Digital 2020' report. Mobile devices now account for more than half of all internet use. Half the world also actively uses social media, up 9.2% on 2019.

What's more, the impending arrival of mass-market 5G mobile data will soon boost mobile internet speeds and data volumes, amplifying these trends still further in the medium to long term.

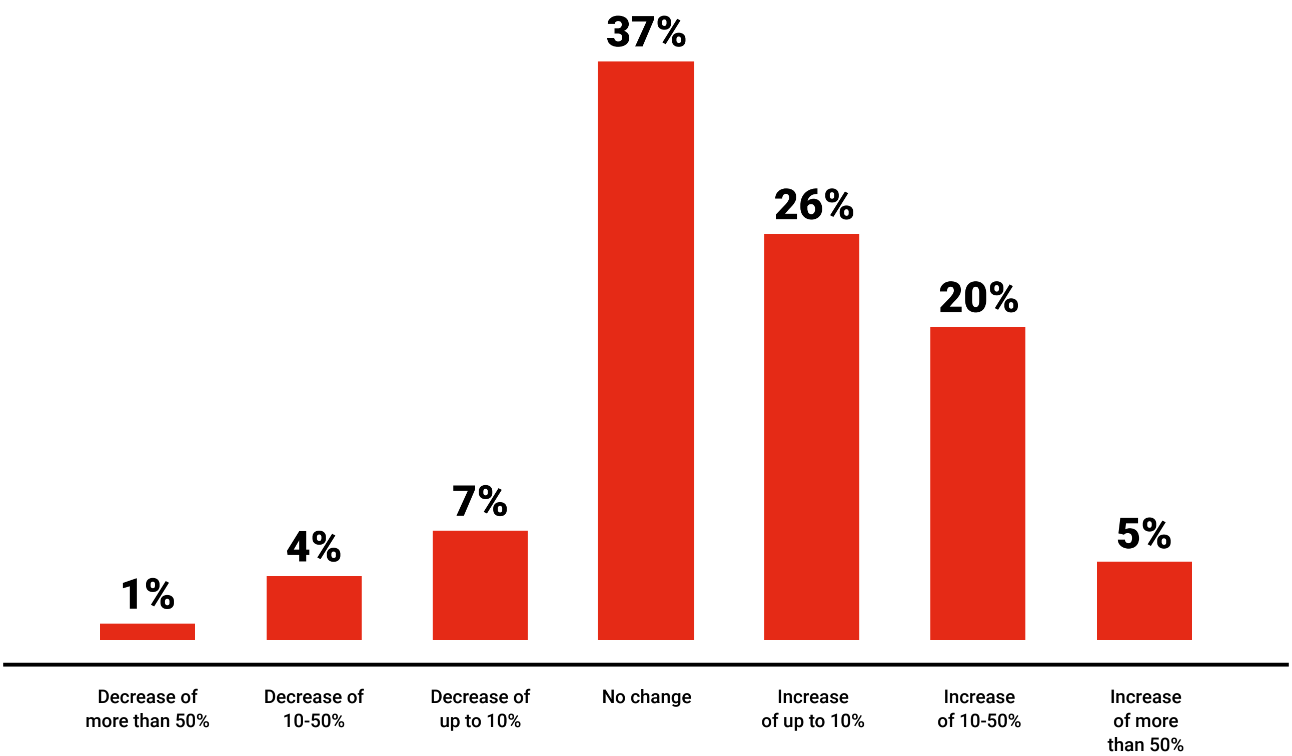
The role of short-form video in particular is likely to become more important. Given effectively unlimited mobile streaming capabilities, consumers will no longer hold back from watching video on the move. Platforms such as TikTok are also creating new and fast-growing modes of content production and consumption with short videos at their heart.

All this means marketers and creatives will need to focus on and invest in high-quality visual assets in future to cut through the growing noise.

"Visual content is vital in inspiring people to take actions to support us."

Carolan Davidge,
British Heart Foundation

Fig 2 — How do you expect your budget for images and videos to change in 2020?*



**Data collected prior to coronavirus lockdown*

PART 2

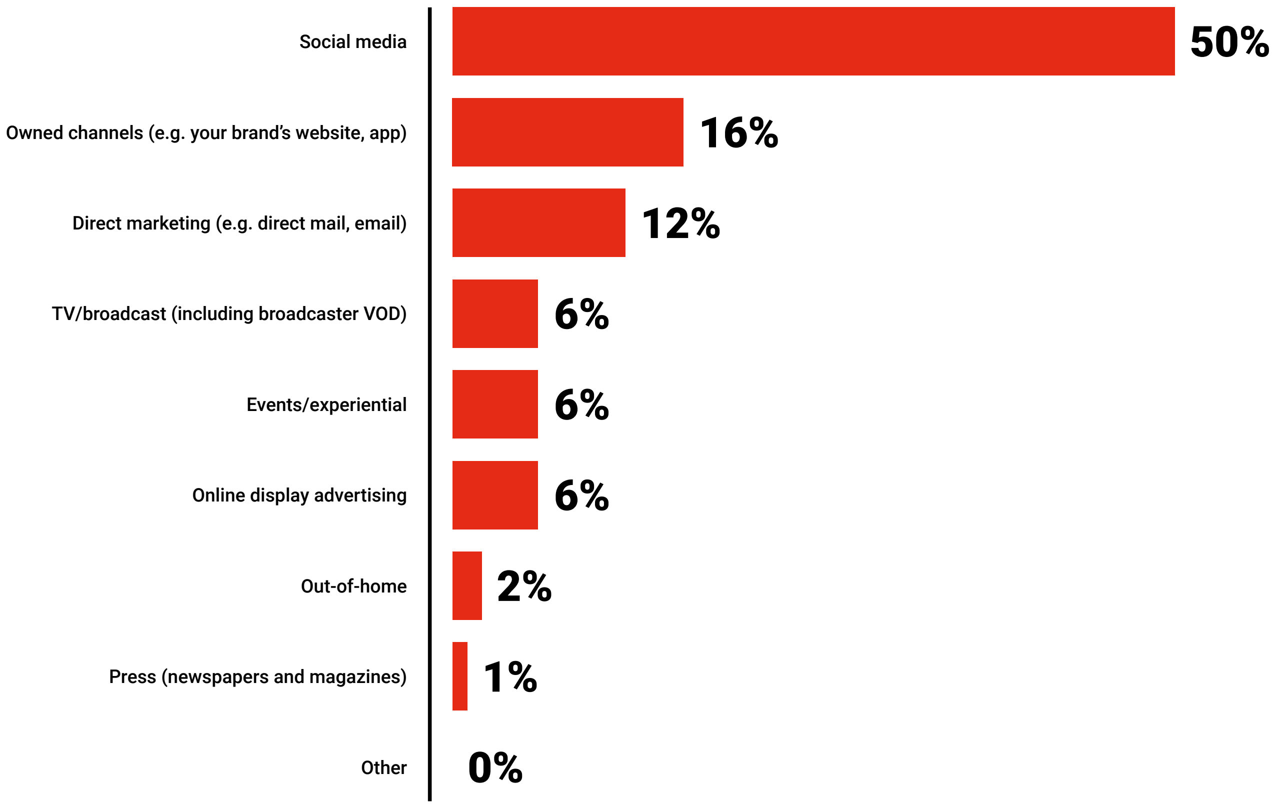
Catering to today's consumer

When it comes to the marketing channels being used to distribute images and video, one theme comes through loud and clear: social media is foremost in brands' thinking.

Social channels are the ones used by far the most for this purpose, and they are also seen as the most effective by marketers – particularly Facebook and Instagram (see fig. 3). This is almost certainly because of the engagement results they see through them.

Whether this is the right view to take is debateable, as discussed later in this report. It's undeniable that consumers are flocking to social channels and consuming more marketing content there than ever – and the platforms can provide the numbers to show it – but this may not make them the most effective media options (see Part 5: The need for new perspectives, page 15).

Fig 3 — In which channel do you believe your visually led content performs most effectively?

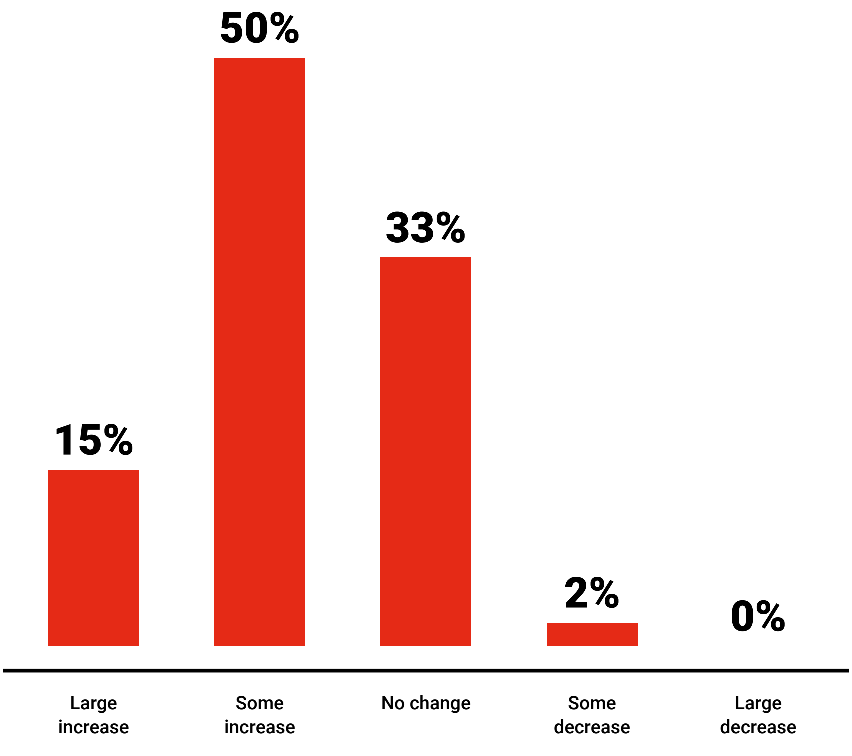


'Vertical' imagery on the rise

Meanwhile, brands are slowly shifting towards producing assets for content consumption that increasingly takes place on mobile devices: 39% of marketers and creatives are already producing more than half their visual assets orientated vertically for smartphone screens, and 65% think they'll use more vertical imagery in the next two years (see fig. 4).

Even brands in the traditional broadcast sector are seeing the online ecosystem increasingly influence their creation of visual assets. Canal Plus creative director Olivier Schaack says: "Now [my challenge is] to manage the digital transformation - to get rid of the broadcast-centric vision of Canal Plus's brands, to move to a digital-centric expression."

Fig 4 — How will your use of vertical imagery change in the next two years?



Video's elevated importance

Bespoke commissioned videos (including gifs) are seen as the most effective visual form, compared with other kinds of commissioned and stock visual assets, with 47% ranking them top (see fig. 5). Clearly, this can encompass many different media types – from TV to digital out-of-home to short-form social memes – and, as mentioned in Part 1 of this report, the trend is likely to become more pronounced as mobile video consumption goes up.

As Ace & Tate art director James Cullen comments: "We still do a lot of photoshoots, but with social media we want to try and add more native content that comes to life through animation or film – whether it's behind-the-scenes footage or just some native footage created for those platforms. We still use a lot of photography [on social platforms], but we're trying to integrate more moving images, and trying to evolve traditional graphic design and move away from [static images] to things that animate and come to life."

Csaba Szabo

VP, EMEA, Shutterstock

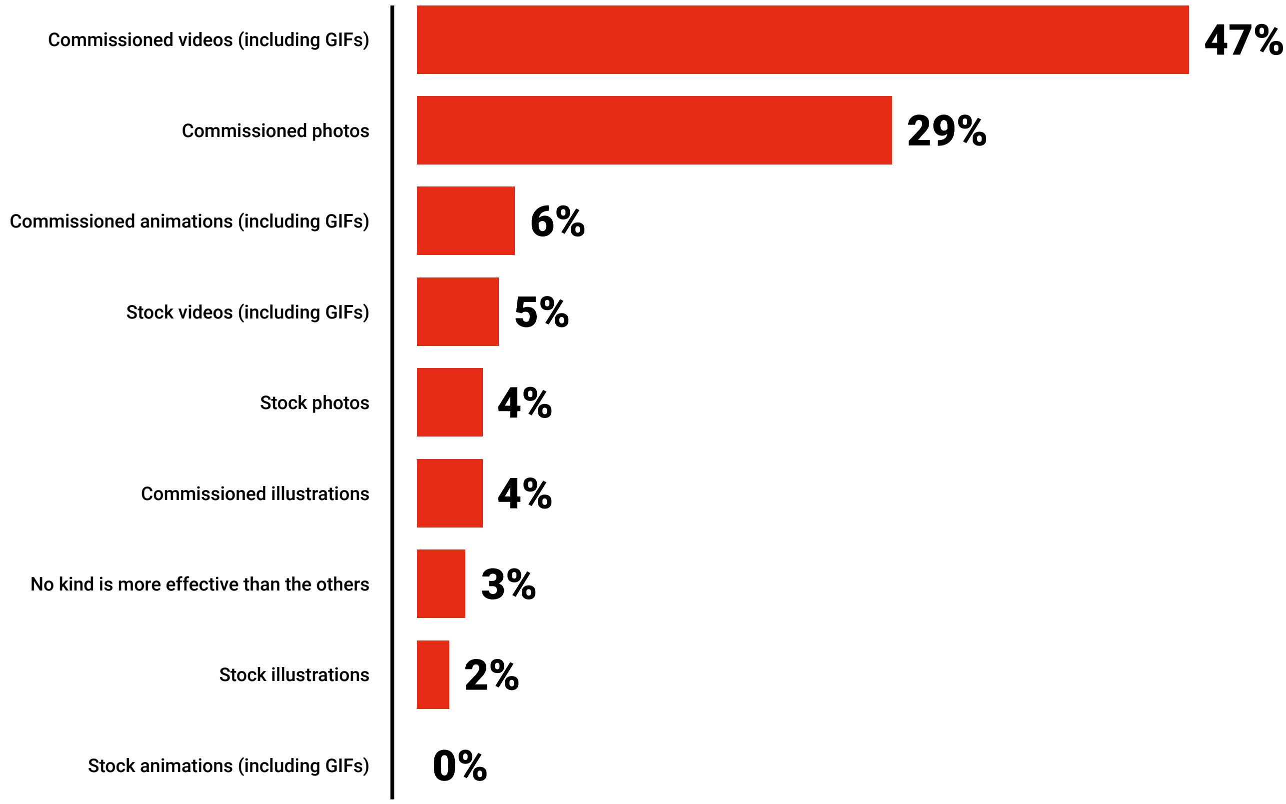
Given the popularity of established platforms like Instagram and Facebook, and now the rise of newcomers like TikTok, the importance of social media for brands has never been more prevalent. These platforms have given marketers more opportunities to talk to consumers through engaging, thumb-stopping content in an accessible and affordable environment. Within these channels, brands are placing greater importance specifically on video due to the high volume of consumer engagement.

At Shutterstock, we've seen a rising appetite for footage from customers and our contributor community continues to meet that demand by contributing over 70,000 videos to our platform weekly.

As it relates to brands, they are now challenged with the herculean task of creating targeted video content for countless channels in order to attract and engage with potential customers. Unable to rely solely on their internal teams or agencies to meet the level of output, many are leveraging our services as a creative partner to fill those gaps through our Custom offering or our optimisation services, to turn their existing videos or TV adverts into more social media friendly content such as Instagram Stories.

As access to smartphones and the internet widens globally, this need for content will only grow, putting brands in the challenging situation of continually producing high-quality, engaging social media content and videos at a greater frequency.

Fig 5 — Which kind of visual content performs most effectively?



Standing out and earning attention

Dexcom EMEA marketing director John Bernard is agnostic about format, but firm on the need to adapt to today's media consumption behaviours, as driven by social channels. "For visuals, it doesn't matter so much [whether it's] animation versus video versus photography as how quickly the ad can generate interest within two seconds before the 'skip advert' button is pressed," he says.

Visual style and tone of voice also matter for creating brand salience and winning consumers' attention. While social and mobile-first content has been characterised in recent years by highly polished, highly stylised Instagram influencers, the most effective content visual content today has a more homely feel.

The key content trend is towards authenticity and simplicity, perhaps as a reaction to celebrity saturation and the sameness of banal influencer culture. Words such as 'authentic', 'real' and 'realism' are mentioned 23 times by marketers and creatives asked to describe the visual styles that work most effectively for them, while 'simple' or 'simplistic' are cited 16 times.

Fig 6 — What visual style is most effective?

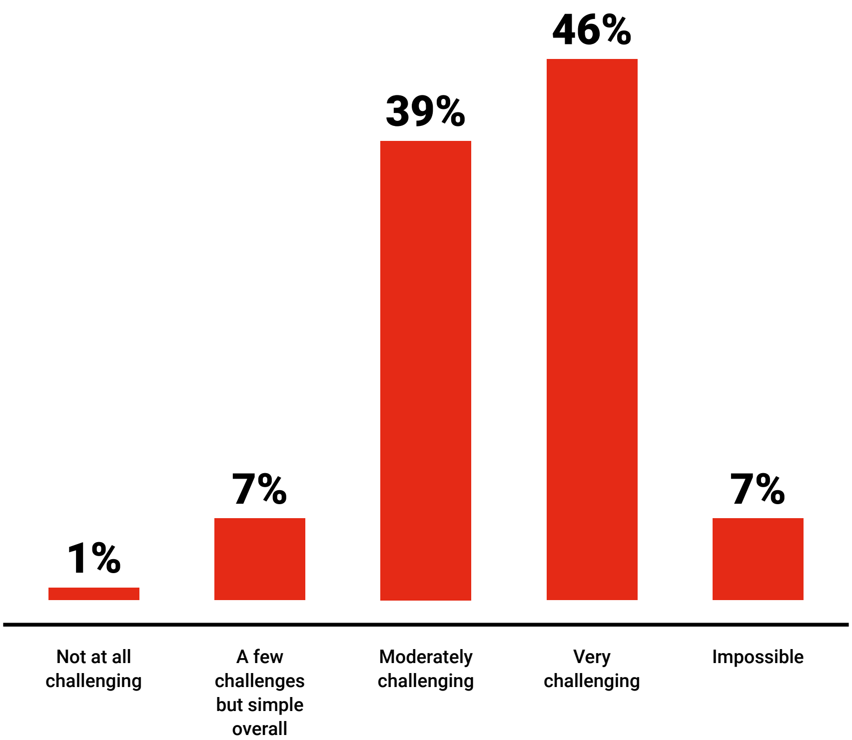
PART 3

The struggle to prove effectiveness

The trends for image and video usage in marketing point in clear directions, but marketers and creatives don't do a good job of justifying why they choose these paths. Despite being certain that visuals are important, they struggle to demonstrate it in the language of hard metrics that businesses understand.

Almost all of them (92%) say it is at least moderately challenging to attribute commercial performance to visual assets, and more than half (53%) say it is very challenging or impossible (see fig. 7).

Fig 7 — How challenging do you find it to attribute financial performance to visual assets?



The challenge of attribution

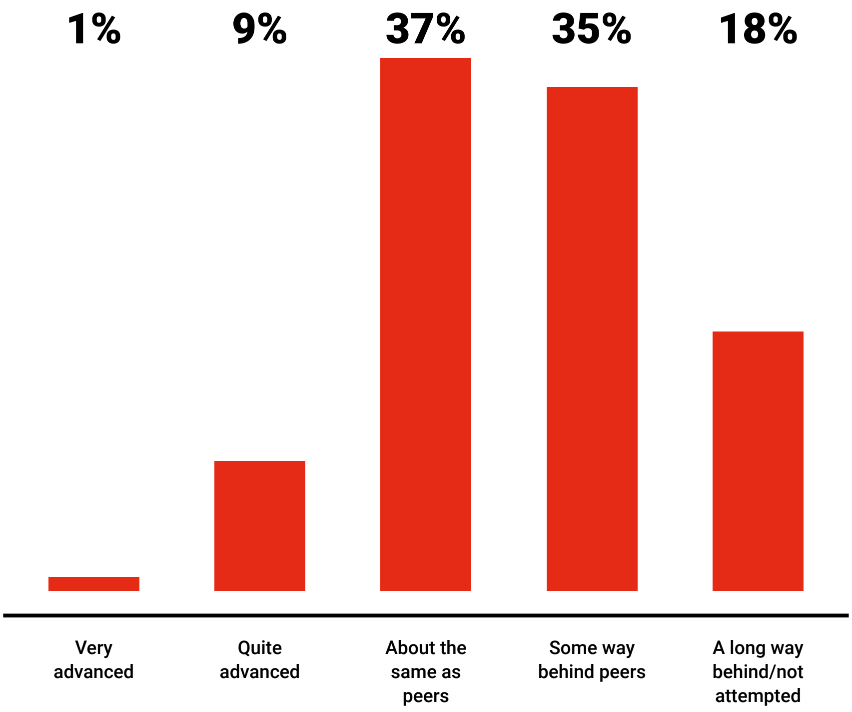
It's perhaps inevitable that this should be the case, since so many of today's marketers and creatives are used to judging the success of creative in terms of the numbers of clicks they get online. The volume of marketing messages and executions brands now place in the market also makes it harder to attribute commercial outcomes of campaigns to one or another of them, and the volume of data points available makes it difficult to know which metrics are most important.

> **"We're trying to integrate more moving images, and trying to evolve traditional graphic design."**
>
> **James Cullen,**
> Ace & Tate

British Heart Foundation's Davidge says: "The biggest challenge is that, being such a large organisation, it can be hard to keep track of everything and make sure communications are effective. We are sometimes at risk of possibly measuring things too much. Sometimes with a ream of results it can be hard to decipher what to focus on in terms of making improvements."

A lack of established best practice in the industry is obvious from the level of insecurity marketers and creatives display in this field. Asked about their capability for linking visual assets to financial performance, 53% think they're behind their peers, while only 10% think they're ahead of them (see fig. 8).

Fig 8 — How advanced are you at linking visual assets to financial outcomes?



Rejection of measurement

Some brands eschew the concept of proving effectiveness entirely – often because they want their output to stay fresh. Oatly creative director Michael Lee says: "We don't really measure the effectiveness of anything. If we did that, we'd act like a marketing department, and that's the last thing we want to be."

Similarly, Canal Plus's Schaack says: "I think our experience and intuition are still strong enough that we don't need [to measure effectiveness of content]."

While it's possible to create highly successful marketing content without having a culture of measuring effectiveness and using this to guide your behaviours, it's not a strategy recommended for most. Relying on gut instinct for competitive advantage may work for exceptionally creative and talented teams, but by definition it can't work for everyone.

What's even more pertinent is that, in many brands, finance teams and boards expect marketing investments to be justified. If you can't do that, increased spend on visuals is unlikely to be sustainable and you will limit your own professional credibility and potential for career progression.

Emma Isaac

Brand marketing director, NatWest Group

We have a comprehensive tracking system. We have ongoing effectiveness tracking through Kantar, which we use across all of our main campaigns and content, which helps us to understand where we're driving consideration.

We model all of these things incredibly carefully, so we know to what level we're driving different brand measures – awareness, salience, etc – and to what extent we're driving business outcomes. On top of that we do a lot of focus groups, and research groups.

We'll then measure that against our own set of brand measures – so against the attributes we're trying to land in terms of personality, and what we want [visual] content to be reflecting.

We also hold review sessions where we get our whole community of marketers together, we put all of the work on the wall to determine what's working and what isn't, and we make a clear action plan. We bring our agency partners into that as well, reviewing the work and critiquing it and agreeing a really strong campaign for how we're going to improve.

The measurement conundrum

One of the main reasons marketers and creatives may struggle to link commercial outcomes to visual content is that the metrics and methodologies being used to do so are not well suited to the objectives marketers and creatives have in mind.

Brand awareness is the most common objective of visual assets, named by 81% (see fig. 9), and this makes sense, given the recommendations of Les Binet and Peter Field's landmark effectiveness research, 'The Long and the Short of It'. Its analysis argues for placing 60% of marketing budget into long-term brand objectives – awareness being a fundamental one.

Fig 9 — For which marketing objectives do you use visually led content?

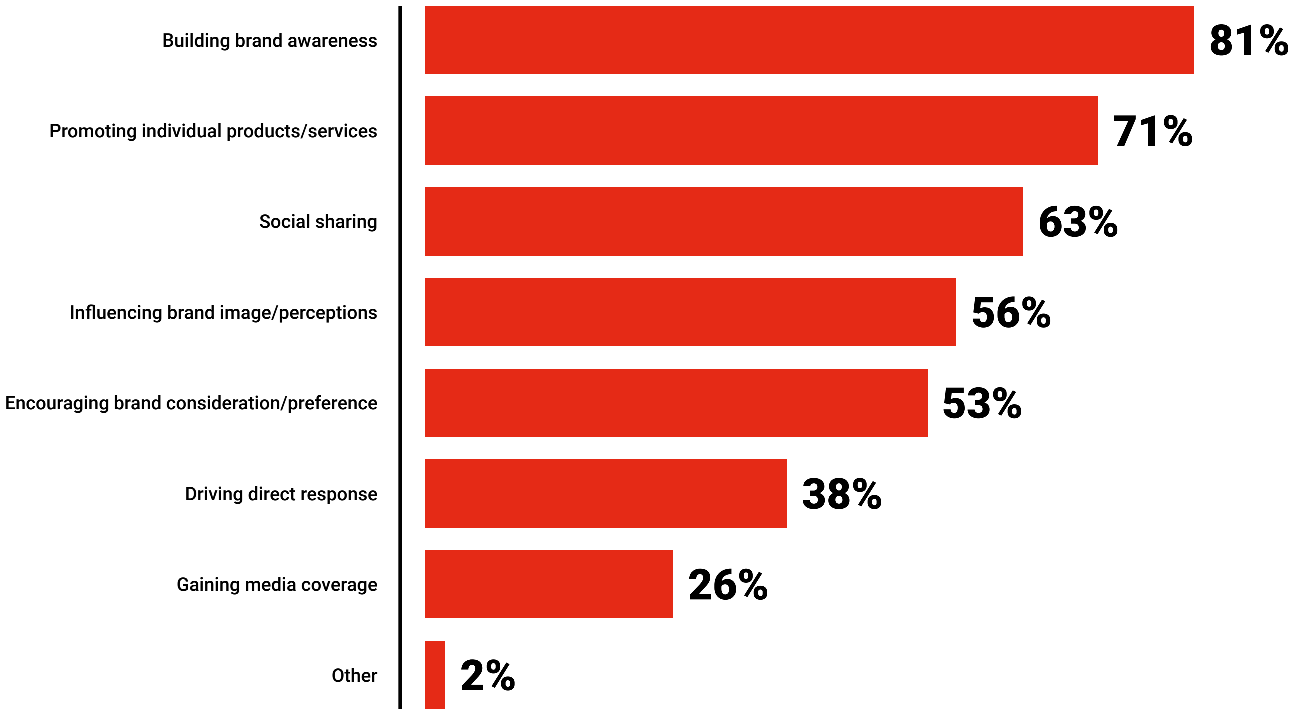
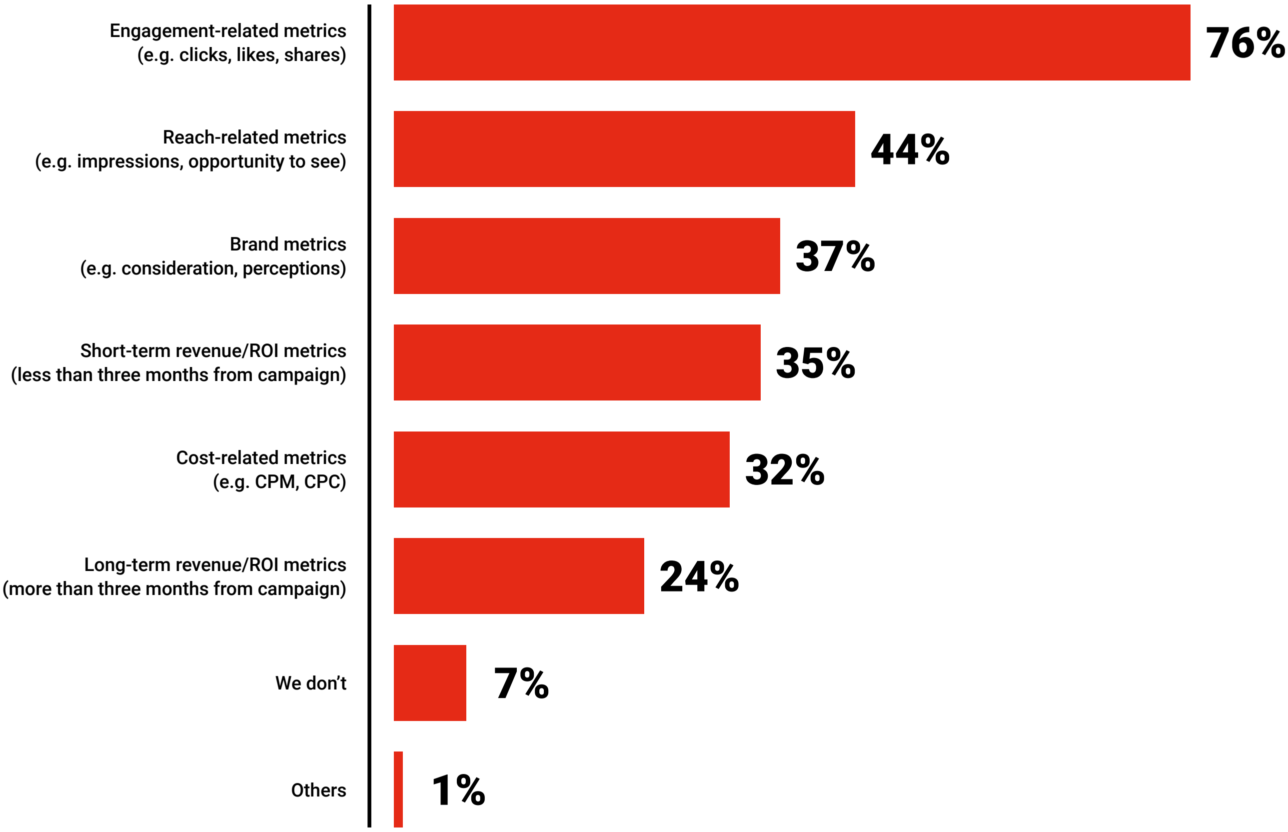


Fig 10 — How do you measure the effectiveness of visually led content?



Measuring the wrong things

Yet the most popular metrics and measurement methods used to judge effectiveness aren't set up to assess marketing content's impact on long-term measures linked to brand (see fig. 10). The most popular by far are engagement-related, such as clicks, likes and shares, named by 76%.

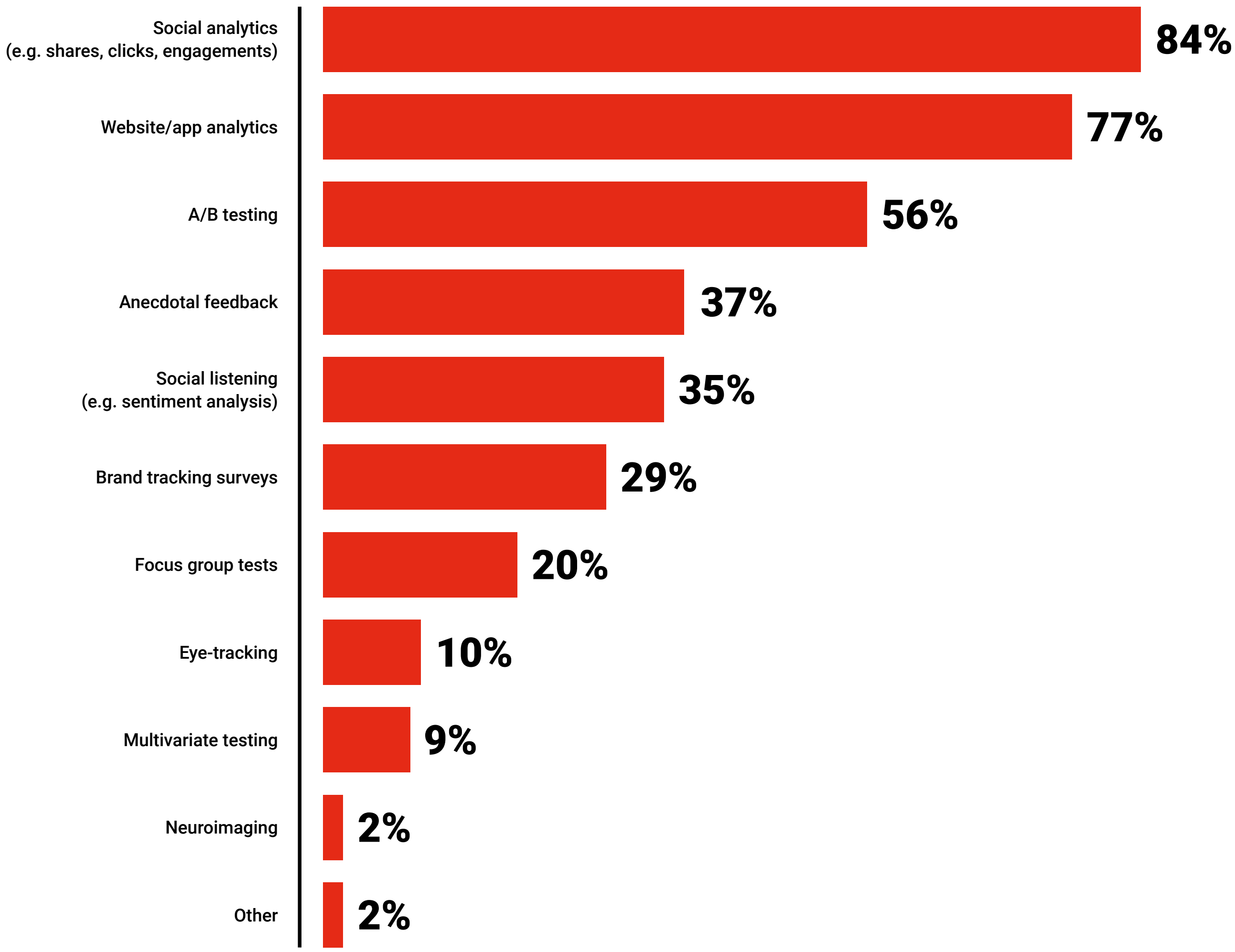
Less than a quarter of marketers and creatives (24%) measure success based on long-term return on investment more than three months from a campaign, and only 37% are using brand-related metrics such as awareness, consideration or purchase intent. Even short-term financial returns are hardly considered worth measuring, with only 35% doing so.

Of itself engagement has no financial value unless it can be ultimately linked to commercial outcomes, which we have already seen that marketers struggle with. This suggests a lack of strategic thought and a sense that marketers and creatives are tracking what's easiest to measure, not what's most important.

Similarly, the most commonly used testing and evaluation methodologies are geared up to optimise content for engagement (see fig. 11). Social analytics lead the way, named by 84%, followed by website and app analytics (77%) and A/B testing (56%).

> "It can be shown the importance of campaign assets is key, alongside consumer targeting and having a product with a recognised consumer need."
>
> **John Bernard,**
> Dexcom

Fig 11 — How do you test how well visual content performs against objectives?



Weaning off engagement

If brands are to show the returns from their marketing assets, they need to wean themselves of the drug of looking purely at engagement metrics. While clicks, shares and likes probably give some indication of how commercially successful a campaign is, marketers and creatives need to make more effort to link up this data with that from disparate sources across their organisations – most likely with the help of colleagues in other functions and external specialists.

They need to do better at attributing commercial outcomes and ROI to engagement with visual content. Their existing toolkit will be a big part of solving this puzzle, but no one metric or testing method can do it alone.

Dexcom's Bernard gives an example of how it can be achieved, however, recalling one of his previous marketing roles: "At Mozilla we A/B tested different visuals with messages, but then also the same messages with different visuals. We saw an uptick with certain campaign visuals, tracking [which ones] increased click-throughs. [We] increased these creative impressions to great success, encouraging more people globally to download the latest version of Firefox onto their Mobile.

"Campaign metrics showed we delivered the lowest cost per acquisition and highest downloads through this methodology. So it can be shown the importance of campaign assets is key, alongside consumer targeting and having a product with a recognised consumer need."

PART 5

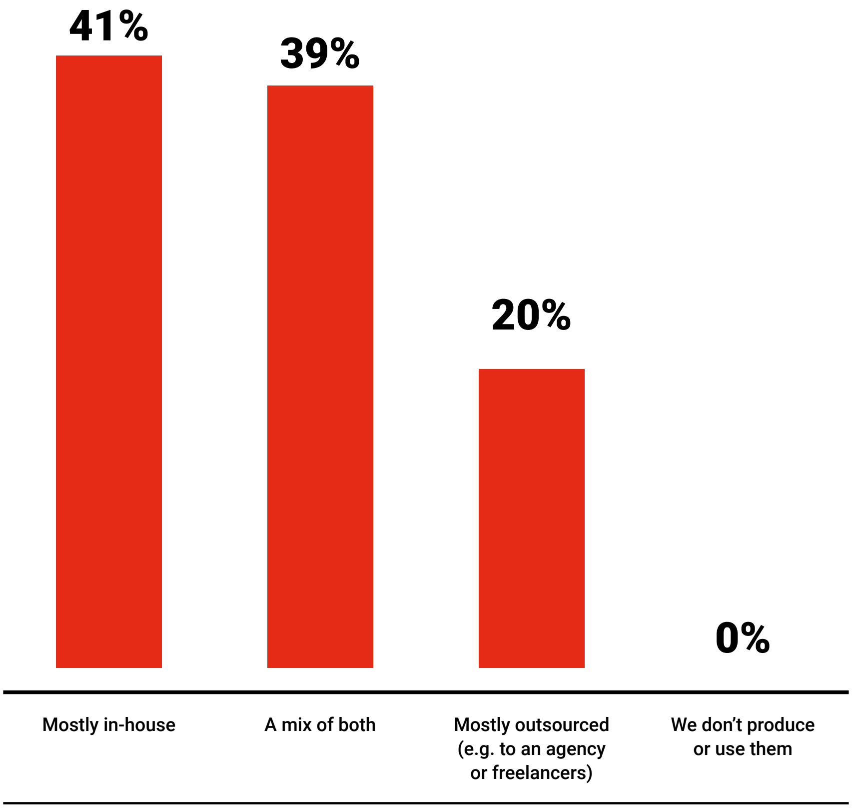
The need for new perspectives

New practices are needed, but so too is new thinking. Rarely can teams achieve fundamental change without outside perspectives, and brands perhaps need this to ground them in the things that should matter.

Much of the production of visual assets is done by brands themselves: 80% of brand marketers and creatives do at least some of this in-house and 41% do most of it there, while only 20% mostly outsource visual assets to agencies (see fig. 12). Could in-housing be contributing towards groupthink, a failure to challenge habitual behaviours and a gravitation towards easier measurement options?

The difficulty experienced in linking visual content to commercial success – as well as the belief of most brands that they are behind in doing so – would suggest marketers and creatives need to ask for more outside help, whether from other departments or external providers.

Fig 12 — How do you produce visually-led marketing assets?



Csaba Szabo

VP, EMEA, Shutterstock

Over the past few years, there has been a shift in mentality and desire for brands to move their creative production from agency partners to in-house. It is my fundamental belief that there's enough room, and certainly enough work, for in-house talent, agencies, and also independent creators, and they each bring their own value. I think for brands it all comes down to truly recognising the capabilities and limitations of their talent pool, having a greater understanding of the complexities hidden within the creative briefs and processes, and knowing if and where to find the right agency or person to get the job done.

Emphasise media neutrality

Doing so might also provide them with evidence for a recalibration of media strategies. At present, there is a significant trend away from using traditional media. Less than 50% of survey respondents use visual assets in any one traditional mass medium (press, out of home or TV), while almost all (97%) use them in social media (see fig. 13).

Yet Ebiquity's landmark 2018 study, 'Re-evaluating Media', suggests the former are the more effective channels for brand-building – as well as objectives such as brand salience, driving emotional response and return on investment. The research showed a knowledge gap among marketers, who perceive social media as being more effective than it really is for these purposes.

Perspectives from agencies and specialists with expertise on attribution modelling could help marketers and creatives understand how to make the links between engagement with visuals and commercial impact, and to appreciate the importance of media neutrality. Doing so could make all the difference to protecting your budget, demonstrating your effectiveness and maximising your career potential.

> "For brands it all comes down to truly recognising the capabilities and limitations of their talent pool."
>
> **Csaba Szabo,** Shutterstock

Fig 13 — In which marketing channels do you use visual assets?